

Visual Images: what to look for and what to think about

The methodology we employ in reading visual images is much the same as we deployed later week in our discussion of the 'Lives' of Thomas.

For many people in the Middle Ages images were more important than text. Medieval Europe was a highly visual culture. Medieval images are thus an important source for the historian. We can look at what medieval images contain – what they looked like – but also at how they were used and what purposes they served. Images range over sculpture in castles and churches, manuscript illuminations, wall paintings, jewellery, textiles, liturgical objects etc.

Critical questions to ask are:

WHO OR WHAT? What does the image depict? Are there details other than the main image that need to be explained – perhaps in the borders or margins?

PURPOSE? Images do not just depict, they represent and they have a purpose. Does the image seek to glorify God? Represent sanctity or holiness? Display authority? Convey status? Provoke a particular feeling or emotion? Teach and educate? All these are possible and not exclusive.

CRITICAL OR SUBVERSIVE? Sometimes images that appear to 'tell a story' or 'convey a message' do the opposite. Through inclusion of other elements (such as monsters and grotesques in the margins of psalters) or the scenes in the borders of the Bayeux Tapestry) images can become subversive or carry a coded message.

LOCATION: An image in one context can carry a different message from the same image in another context.

VIEWERS AND USERS: What kind of people would have seen the image – and where?

You could also take a particular image and consider it in relation to these questions.

I hope you are going to enjoy your reading.